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ABSTRACT

Writing samples of four Arab college freshmen students of English as a second language were analyzed. The objectives were to classify the lexical problems found, determine the causes of the problems, and examine the students' choice of certain lexical items in an attempt to determine whether the students were more attuned to the form or the substance of the language. Eight types of lexical errors were found: (1) overgeneralization of the use of one translation equivalent; (2) literal translation; (3) divergence; (4) confusion of words formally or phonetically similar; (5) confusion of related or unrelated words with similar meanings; (6) unfamiliarity with word collocation; (7) overuse of a few general lexical items; and (8) nonce errors (those that seem to defy analysis). Based on the findings, suggestions are offered for teaching lexical non-congruence with the help of semantic field theory and componential analysis, teaching the process of describing meaning, and teaching collocations. Examples and discussion of student errors are included. (MSE)

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A CLASSIFICATION OF THE LEXICAL PROBLEMS OF EFL/ESL STUDENTS

by

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I. Purpose:

The purpose of this study is to shed some light on the lexical problems of underprepared college freshmen majoring in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL). More specifically, the purpose is to analyze several writing samples obtained from the four students participating in the present study,[1] with the aim of classifying the problems found in the writing samples, and of reasoning about the causes of these problems. The purpose is also to examine the students' choice of certain lexical items in terms of their frequency in an attempt to determine whether the students are more interested in the form of the language than in its substance. The paper will conclude with some suggestions for helping EFL/ESL students overcome the lexical difficulties they face in writing English.

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[1] The students were freshmen at the Faculty of Languages and Translation, Al-Azhar University, Cairo, Egypt, during the academic year 1981-82. The students' native language is Arabic. The pseudonyms of the students are AYMAN, EHAB, HAMĀDA, and WALEED.

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II. Need:

The need for a vocabulary analysis rather than a grammatical or syntactic analysis is that

> grammar has been given preference for centuries because of its higher prestige in ancient, medieval and later times. It is certainly true that grammatical errors are bound to be more "productive" due to the fact that grammar constitutes a closed system which means that a wrong rule will produce many wrong forms. If, however, grammatical errors are judged to be more serious, one would have to give up the claim that the communication aspect is the most important thing about language learning because obviously communication is based more on lexical than on grammatical items. Thus decisions as to preference may well differ according to the aim of the language learning.[2]

Picking up on the last statement in the quoted passage, we can say that the importance attached to certain types of errors is closely connected with the goal of foreign language teaching and learning. Randolph Quirk defines two such goals of foreign language study as comprehensibility and conformity.[3] If the goal is conformity, errors should be given the same degree of importance, no matter how they affect communication. On

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[2] Gerhard Nickel, "Aspects of Error Evaluation and Grading," Errata: Papers in Error Analysis, ed. Jan Svartvik (Lund, Sweden: CWK Gleerup, 1973), p. 27.

[3] Randolph Quirk, The Use of English, 2d ed. (London: Longman, 1968), p. 109.

the other hand, if the goal is that learners should be able to produce comprehensible utterances or compositions in the foreign language, errors which make such production difficult or impossible to understand should undoubtedly be regarded as more serious than others. Assuming that the goal of foreign language teaching in the English Department of the Faculty of Languages and Translation is comprehensibility or communicative competence rather than conformity--at least in the beginning stages of specialization in the language--the rationale for concentrating on vocabulary misuse rather than on grammar misuse appears to be self-evident.

The argument already put forward for considering lexical errors as more detrimental to communication than grammatical errors is sometimes countered by statements to the effect that lexical errors are more likely to be "performance mistakes" than grammatical errors, which are more likely to be "competence errors." This claim is refuted by reasoning about the causes behind the lexical errors which Arabic-speaking students make.

Another argument in favor of concentrating on the lexical difficulties of the students stems from the fact that research abounds which demonstrates that the isolated teaching of grammatical skills has little or nothing to

contribute to the skills necessary for actual writing.[4] This being the case, vocabulary seems to warrant more attention in analyzing the students' writing problems.

Such an analysis of the students' lexical problems is necessary if we consider Wilga Rivers' statement that linguists and language teachers in general seem to have ignored words'

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[4]See, for example, Ingrid Strom, "Research in Grammar and Usage and its Implications for Teaching Writing," Bulletin of the School of Education, Indiana University, 36, No. 5 (1960), 1-21; Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer, Research in Written Composition (Champaign, Ill.: NCTE, 1963), p. 34; Frank O'Hare, Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing Without Formal Grammar Instruction (Urbana, Ill.: NCTE, 1971); and for a British view see Andrew Wilkinson, The Foundations of Language (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 32-34.

For a moderate but a dated view see John B. Carroll, who reserves judgment on the grammar-writing relationship on the ground that the research evidence is not conclusive. He states that "research on the effectiveness of teaching English grammar in improving English composition has been mainly negative, but until this research has been repeated with improved methods of teaching of English grammar, I will remain unconvinced that grammar is useless in this respect" [John B. Carroll, "Psycholinguistics and the Teaching of English Composition," Teaching Freshman Composition, eds. Gary Tate & Edward P. J. Corbett (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 118].

I believe that observing grammatical rules will not in itself make a student a good writer or even keep him from being a bad one. However, careful attention to the rules of grammar is a necessary condition to writing well.

> essential role in communication through another tongue, claiming that structure, syntax, grammar . . . is what must be learned first--and well--before we bother our students with too many words.[5]

Rivers goes on to assert that "the decline in emphasis on vocabulary learning was accelerated by movements in linguistics which concentrated on phonology, morphology, or syntax, with a corresponding neglect of semantics."[6] This neglect of vocabulary is manifest in the existence of some studies which deal with the syntactic problems of Arabic-speaking students,[7] and, to my knowledge, in the lack of any study dealing with the lexical problems of these students.

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[5] Wilga M. Rivers, "Apples of Gold in Pictures of Silver: Where Have All the Words Gone?," Studia Linguistica, 35 (1981), 114.

[6] Ibid., p. 117.

[7] See, for example, Margaret Sue Scott and G. Richard Tucker, "Error Analysis and English Language Strategies of Arab Students," Language Learning, 24 (1974), 69-97. It is to be noted that while this article deals with errors in syntax and function words, "lexical errors were ignored." (p. 73)

See also Gerry Abbott, "Towards a More Rigorous Analysis of Foreign Language Errors," IRAL, 18 (1980) 121-34. The article deals with errors in restrictive relative clauses made by Arabic-speaking students at the University of Manchester, England.

III. Methods of Analysis:

A. A Classification of Lexical Errors

I read each composition carefully with the purpose of identifying all instances of lexical problems. These instances were underlined and then the sentence containing the problem or a part of it sufficient to make the context clear was copied onto a 5x8 index card. Occasionally, a sentence preceding the one containing the error had to be included for clarity of context.

In cases where there was any doubt as to whether a problem existed or not, I made use of some well-known and widely used dictionaries as a means of determining the status of the item in question. For example, in AYMAN's sentence I ask from the responsibles of Al-Azhar to careful by Al-Azhar's students . . . the question arose as to whether the word responsible could be used as a noun and in what sense. Consulting Webster New International Dictionary of the English Language (2nd ed., 1949), I found that the word in question can be used as a noun but in a quite different sense from the one the student had in mind. Responsible as a noun is defined as "an actor prepared to fill various important roles as occasion demands." This definition was the basis on which the student's sentence beyond any doubt, was considered to include a lexical problem.

Consulting dictionaries sometimes resulted in interesting pieces of information, e.g., that the word learn which EHAB used in the sense of teach in his sentence And he can learns the Islam instructions to his family . . . was, according to Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary, once used to mean to teach and that that usage was formerly standard, but is now substandard.

Having decided on the existence of lexical errors, I reasoned about the causes of these problems and classified the problems accordingly. The errors were listed by student in the following order: AYMAN, EHAB, HAMĀDA, and WALEED. The problems were then discussed in some detail with the aim of shedding some light on their source. When no source of a certain problem was readily identified, the problem had to be classified as a nonce error. However, an attempt was made to justify the classification as a nonce problem.

In cases where a sentence included more than one lexical problem, only one problem was underlined at a time. The same sentence was then listed under the other appropriate classification(s) and discussed there. For example, in AYMAN's sentence And if it [i.e., education] were available they cannot get it either for economical attitude which allows not them to get it, only the word attitude was underlined and discussed under its

classification as an instance of overgeneralization of the use of one translation equivalent. The word economical was later underlined and discussed under its appropriate classification as an instance of confusion of words formally or phonetically similar. By means of footnotes, the reader's attention is called to the fact that a sentence contained different sorts of lexical errors, and the reader is referred to the appropriate place for a discussion of the other problem(s).

It almost goes without saying that classifying errors into categories according to their source involved a certain degree of arbitrary decision-making whenever there was any uncertainty about where a certain problem fits, or whenever there was some overlapping among the categories. However, it should be noted that such somewhat arbitrary decisions were necessary in order to make such an analysis possible at all. Instances of uncertainty and overlapping are occasionally referred to in the discussion of the problems.

B. Frequency and Rank of Certain Lexical Items

I went through all the compositions written by the four students, looking for suspected examples of preference of form over meaning. To determine if a certain word qualifies as an instance of such preference,

I checked the word's frequency and rank in a well-known book on word-counts by Henry Kučera and W. Nelson Francis.[8] A word on how the book works is in order.

The bulk of the book comprises two frequency lists of all the words in Kučera and Francis's 1,014,000-word corpus. The first list is arranged in descending order of frequency of occurrence, while the second is arranged alphabetically. The number of times each individual word occurred is given in both lists. A table presenting the corpus with rank in descending order of frequency is included and is intended to determine the rank of the word based on its corpus frequency, the most frequent word having the rank 1, the second most frequent the rank 2, and so on. It is only necessary to find the corpus frequency of occurrence for the desired entry in either list (usually in the alphabetical list) and then proceed through the corpus rank table until the same frequency is found. The figure corresponding to this frequency is then the rank of the word. In those cases where the frequency is applicable to more than one word, the table specifies the rank range of those words.

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[8] Henry Kučera and W. Nelson Francis, Computational Analysis of Present-Day American English (Providence, R.I.: Brown University Press, 1967).

For example, to determine the rank of the word workmanship, which EHAB used in the sentence ... now I have not any workmanship, I found in the alphabetical list that its frequency was 6. I referred to the corpus rank table which indicated that for frequency =6 the corresponding rank was 8479-9173.

I then found the frequency of the word job, which the student could have used. This word occurred 238 times, with a corresponding rank of 395. By comparing the rank of the word workmanship with that of job, we come to the conclusion that the student's use of the former word is an instance of giving preference to the less frequently used word, and hence an example of preference of low-frequency words.

IV. Results:

The results of analyzing the students' lexical problems fall into two parts: (A) a classification of the lexical errors in the compositions, and (B) a discussion of the students' use of certain lexical items in terms of their frequency to determine if the students' writing is characterized by preference of form over substance.

A. A Classification of Lexical Errors in the Compositions

The lexical problems in the writing samples fall into eight types: (1) overgeneralization of the use of one translation equivalent; (2) literal translation; (3) divergence; (4) confusion of words formally or phonetically similar; (5) confusion of related or unrelated words with similar meanings; (6) unfamiliarity with word collocation; (7) over-use of a few general lexical items; and (8) nonce errors.

1. Overgeneralizing the Use of One Translation Equivalent

Most of the students' vocabulary problems may be attributed to the fact that they, consciously or unconsciously, translate from their native language (Arabic) while writing in English. In view of the students' general lack of competence in English, they experience considerable difficulty in "thinking" in the foreign language. The

direct reason for this inability seems to be that they have not accumulated sufficient raw material (i.e., lexical items) with which to "clothe their thoughts."[9]

More specifically, in the following examples the students seize on one particular English translation equivalent of the Arabic word they have in mind and then overgeneralize its use in contexts which require a different lexical item. The generalized translation equivalent is usually, but not necessarily, the most common one. Much seems to depend on the order in which the equivalents were presented to the students and the frequency of occurrence of these equivalents in the materials the students are reading.

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[9]According to Boni H.-J. Kirstein ("Reducing Negative Transfer: Two Suggestions for the Use of Translation," The Modern Language Journal, 56 (1972), 73-78), this tendency to translate is manifest in beginning and even intermediate non-native students. She also points out that in most advanced speakers of foreign languages, some sort of simultaneous translation technique is developed and used without much attention being paid to the process of translation. Nelson Brooks ("The Meaning of Bilingualism Today," Foreign Language Annals, 2 (1969), 304-309) carries this point further when he states that even compound bilinguals first encode their message in their mother tongue and then translate it into the second language.

Throughout this section the examples will be listed for each student separately. The whole T-unit will be given, including the error and a sufficient context to make clear wherein the error lies. In each instance the error under discussion is underlined.

Examples

1. AYMAN

A-1.[10] If we take for example some customs, we shall find the problem of public transport which we don't find in any country except in Egypt, and also the events which occur in square of sport especially in football matches.

A-2. If we look at the society we live in--by comparing with the societies of the world--we shall find a great difference among them, these differences such as the great progress and civilizations which these nation could quote them about us.

A-3a. I am sure that the bad attitude of the Muslims today is as a result of their disobedience of Allah. . .

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[10] Throughout this section, A stands for AYMAN, E for EHAB, H for HAMĀDA, and W for WALEED. The number following the initial is a serial number intended to facilitate reference to the example in the discussion.

A-3b. And if it [i.e., education] were available they cannot get it either for economical[11] attitude which allows not them to get it . . .

A-4a. . . . they [i.e., people] prefer this false treasures of this world to the true treasures of heaven. But all this does not forbid the people from possession all this characteristics.

A-4b. We must make good of our characteristics which were not available to the people before in order to benefit our society.

A-5. But if they possessed it [i.e., money] they ought to put it in a benefit proposals in order to serve the world and justify[12] the happiness to it.

A-6. This way is the travel to other foreign countries which is very easy to us to get it through the aircrafts or ships which can remove us in a short time to many countries to see the great progress of these countries as a result of their progress of science and to see the results of their journeys to the moon or to the space in common.

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[11] For a discussion of AYMAN's confusing "economic" with "economical", see sub-section 4 below.

[12] See sub-section 2 below.

2. EHAB

E-1. But Al-Azhar student is collected between the two sciences, the religious and the worldly sciences.

3. HAMĀDA

H-1. But we must take the progressive ideas and let the bad habits which come from the foreign countries.

4. WALEED

W-1. And ask man than [i.e. about] thing in the office.

W-2. . . . war which follow them

W-3a. there proverbial publication in Egypt

W-3b. abstract proverbial publication

W-4. who self proverbial

W-5. abstract proverbial publication

Discussion

In example A-1, square of sport resulted from the fact that in Arabic, the word maydān may be translated as "square" (in the sense of an open area bounded by several streets), or "field" (of study or activity), the former being the most common translation equivalent.

AYMAN then generalizes the use of the word 'square,' thus leading to a wrong collocation, "field of sport[s]" being the correct one.

In A-2, quote them about us is used instead of copy them from us. The cause is that the Arabic word yanqul may be translated as either "quote" or "copy". Learning the word "quote" first as the translation equivalent of yanqul, or consulting his Arabic-English dictionary but failing to choose the appropriate meaning, the student stumbles over "quote". The same analysis is valid for the preposition "about" which is the most common translation equivalent of the Arabic preposition ʕan, and which combines with yanqul.

In examples A-3 a and b, AYMAN uses attitude where "situation" is appropriate. The Arabic word mawqif could be translated as either "attitude" or "situation". The student probably knows the word attitude as the only translation equivalent of the Arabic word, or he may know both of them but thinks that they are interchangeable. The so-called synonyms may foster such a tendency to use different words with the same meaning without due regard to the shades of meaning differentiating them.

The errors in A-4 a and b result from confusing both the meaning of the Arabic word which the student had in mind and a confusion of its translation equivalent. The student probably had the word χaṣa?iṣ "belongings;

possessions" in mind as a starting point. However, the Arabic word itself may mean either "belongings; possessions" or "characteristics". Seizing on the wrong translation equivalent, the one that is not appropriate for this particular context, the student ends up making this error.

In A-5, apart from the erroneous use of benefit as an adjective, and the indefinite article a before a plural noun ("proposals"), AYMAN uses the word proposals by which he means "project". The word mašrūʕ in Arabic covers both "proposal" and "project".

In example A-6, in common arises from the fact that the Arabic word ʕāmm can be translated as either "common" or "general," (or even "public"). The student then seizes on common rather than general. He might have also come across in common in his reading, and somehow came to the conclusion that in common and in general are synonymous, especially if he consulted his dictionary for only common rather than for in common.

2. EHAB

In E-1, EHAB uses is collected between for combines. Disregarding the erroneous use of is collected instead of collects, we can say that the student made this error because yajmaʕ in Arabic can be translated into either collect or combine. Unaware of the appropriate equivalent, EHAB uses the former rather than the latter. The use of

the preposition between with collect is further evidence of the source of the error: Arabic yajmaʕ takes the preposition bayna "between."

3. HAMĀDA

The erroneous use of let in H-1 came about as the result of HAMĀDA's choice of the inappropriate translation equivalent of the Arabic word nadaʕ "leave" or "let." Using the latter rather than the former, he ends up making this mistake.

4. WALEED

In W-1, šay? may be translated into "thing" or "something". WALEED uses the inappropriate equivalent "thing". Had he thought of šay?un ma 'some thing; something', he would have probably produced the correct equivalent.

In W-2, laḥiqat may be translated as either 'followed' or 'afflicted'. The error arises from using the inappropriate equivalent.

In W-3a, muntašir may be translated as only 'widespread'. Since the student probably consulted his dictionary for the root of the word muntašir (i.e. the verb našara), he found the two equivalents "to publish" and "to spread". WALEED apparently came across našr "publication," which is the noun infinitive (and which

is written the same except for the diacritics, which are sometimes neglected or have been ignored by the student). The end result was publication, which is a noun occupying the position of an adjective. What the student actually meant to say was "There are widespread (well-known) proverbs in Egypt."

In W-3b, however, the same error is made. What the student meant was "mere(ly) widespread proverbs." For the erroneous use of abstract instead of mere or merely, see W-5 below.

In W-4, who self proverbial is used instead of "which is the same proverb." nafs has two translation equivalents: 'same' and 'self.'

In W-5, WALEED used the wrong equivalent of mujarrad 'mere; merely' or 'abstract.'

2. Literal Translation

In the following examples, the source of the errors is that the students translate literally from Arabic, word for word, mapping the Arabic text. The result is a word or a combination of words which is hardly comprehensible except to a reader who is already familiar with Arabic.

Examples

1. AYMAN

A-1. When I went to receive my list success I was surprised because I found out that the result was wrong indeed.

A-2. And my dream became truth again . . .

A-3a. Therefore I ask from the responsibles of Al-Azhar to careful by Al-Azhar's students through their secondary studies to be preparing[13] for a college degree . . .

A-3b. At the end I ask the responsibles to pay their attention for Al-Azhar.

2. WALEED

W-1. . . . seeing theatre

W-2. . . . meaning in top composition

Discussion

In A-1, list success is the translation of ?istimaratul najāḥ. [The word ?istimara, however, may be more appropriately translated into 'form'.] By list success, AYMAN

[13] For the use of preparing instead of "prepared" or "ready," see sub-section 5 below.

means the document which a passing student receives and which lists his scores in detail.

In A-2, my dream became truth is the literal translation of ḥulmi ?asḥaḥa haqīqa where ?aṣbaḥa is "became" and ḥaqīqa is "truth". Where English-speaking people expect "came true", the student ends up with became truth, which is a literal translation of the way the idea is expressed in Arabic.

In examples A-3a and b, AYMAN uses the word responsible in the sense of "the responsible people" or "the people in charge". This is a literal translation from the Arabic ?almas?ūlūn, which is a noun in Arabic (and which can also be used as an adjective following a noun). Since nouns and adjectives sometimes blur in Arabic, this was a source of trouble for the student, who added an -s to an adjective.[14]

In W-1, seeing theatre is a literal translation of the Arabic mušahadatul masraḥ, which may be better translated into "watching the theater". This error also arises from the dissimilar collocation across Arabic and English. Where Arabic requires "watching the theatre"

[14]As I have already mentioned, according to Webster New International Dictionary of the English Language (2d ed.; Springfield, Mass.: G. and C. Merriam Co., 1949), the word "responsible" can be used as a noun but in a quite different sense, namely, "an actor prepared to fill various important roles as occasion demands."

("going to the theatre" is also possible), English requires "going to the theatre" or "watching a play/a show."

In W-2 top composition is a literal translation of ra?sul mawdūʕ, literally, "head of the topic" (i.e., the text of the assignment).

3. Divergence

In the examples below, the students produce the "wrong" lexical item whenever one word in Arabic covers (or apparently covers) the same semantic field which requires two or more distinct English words. This situation is referred to by John B. Carroll as divergence, which occurs when "the second language contains a larger number of symbols and corresponding semantic distinctions than the first language."[15]

The problem of divergence results, as Vivian Cook puts it, when learners assume "not just that languages are all the same in general terms, but that they are the same in specific details."[16] More specifically, divergence or interference on the lexical level is due to the fact that the semantic range of supposedly equivalent words in the different languages may only partially coincide,

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[15] John B. Carroll, "Linguistic Relativity, Contrastive Linguistics, and Language Learning," IRAL, 1 (1963), 17.

[16] Vivian J. Cook, "Cognitive Processes in Second Language Learning," IRAL, 15 (1977), 2.

without the students' being able to differentiate the common ground from the points of divergence.

This kind of lexical difference between the two languages may be illustrated by the following example.

Figure 1

šahīr: An Example of Divergence

šahīr	
famous [+ good quality or characteristic]	notorious [- good quality or characteristic]

The use of the above notation is simply intended as a rough indication of the semantic element whose presence or absence distinguishes a specific word from another or others with which it covers a certain semantic area.[17] All other semantic features apart from the distinctive ones are assumed to be shared by all the words in the same field. In the example above, the Arabic word šahīr stands in a superordinate relationship, as it were, to English famous and notorious.

[17] For a discussion of the critical components of meaning, see, for example, E. H. Bendix, Componential Analysis of General Vocabulary (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1966).

Examples

1. AYMAN

A-1. Therefore we are sure that very much things still before us in order to justify the hope for the society.

A-2. We see that this reason is considers [sic.] the most important one which affected and made our time different from our parents' time because we see it the direct reason for progress of the nation.

A-3. And I cannot find any reason for that, because Al-Azhar has many very good teachers who are capable to improve the education of the students of Al-Azhar who became famous for their weakness in English language which became our problem at the Faculty.

2. WALEED

W-1. . . . much kind . . .

Discussion

In A-1, AYMAN uses the word much with a countable noun (things). The cause of this error is that in Arabic only one word kaʿīra is available to cover both

much and many.[18] The same error is made by WALEED in W-1 when he writes much kind[s]. This error may be presented as

Figure 2

kaeīra: An Example of Divergence

kaeīra	
many [+ countable]	much [- countable]

In A-2, the student uses reason for where "cause of" would be appropriate. In the students' native language, sabab means both 'reason' and 'cause', and hence his difficulty with choosing the appropriate word. Diagrammatically, this divergence problem may be rendered as follows:

Figure 3

Sabab: An Example of Divergence

sabab	
cause [+ effect/result]	reason [- effect/result]

[18] Circumlocution is possible, however, in the form of kaeiratul ʕadad, i.e., 'many in number.'

Example A-3 has already been referred to and diagrammed in the discussion of divergence above.

4. Confusion of Words Formally or Phonetically Similar

Unlike errors resulting from translating and divergence, some other errors have their source in interference from another English word. The students sometimes confuse words on the ground of their formal similarity regardless of their meaning. Shaughnessy discusses this type of vocabulary error when she states that it

> reflects the student's effort to bring meaning to a word that otherwise seems semantically arbitrary. Usually he does this by substituting for the appropriate word a more familiar word that is phonetically similar but semantically unrelated to the word the reader expects. This satisfies the writer's need for a word that carries meaning.[19]

It is to be noted, however, that this discussion by Shaughnessy applies to only some of the examples below. Yet, all the examples have enough in common to justify including them together.

Examples

1. AYMAN

A-1. And if it [i.e., education] were available they cannot get it either for economical attitude which allows not them to get it . . .

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[19] Mina P. Shaughnessy, Errors and Expectations (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 190.

A-2. And if we try to look for our problems we faced in learning English in general, we shall find that everything was problem for us . . .

A-3. I retraced the loss confidence again . . .

2. HAMĀDA

H-1. Every son take of the person in live him in order to like father in any thing.

3. WALEED

W-1. . . . war get reflect big in society

Discussion

In example A-1, AYMAN uses economical in the sense of economic. What prompted this error was formal and phonetic similarity as well as overgeneralization of such adjectives which accept the suffix -al without a comparable change in meaning, e.g., poetic = poetical.

In A-2 AYMAN uses look for, which is partially similar to the two-word verb that he should have used, namely, look at/into.

Unlike examples A-1 and A-2, A-3 involves the type of distortion Shaughnessy refers to; instead of restored, the student used a word which is phonetically but not semantically related to the one he should have used, thus ending up with retraced.

A partial similarity is exemplified by H-1 where HAMĀDA uses like for look like or more likely be like (which covers both character and looks).

In W-1, WALEED presumably intended to say big effect but stumbled over the phonetically similar word reflect. The context makes "war has a big effect on society" a plausible intention on the writer's part.

5. Confusion of Related or Unrelated Words with Similar Meaning

Some errors resulted from the students' confusing related or unrelated words or phrases with similar meanings. By "related words or phrases" is meant those which are derived from the same basic form; by "unrelated words or phrases" is meant those which are not derived from the same form, but which have a similar meaning.

Examples

1. AYMAN

A-1. Therefore I ask from the responsibles of Al-Ashar to careful by Al-Azhar students through their secondary studies to be preparing for a college degree . . .

A-2. . . . the aircrafts or ships which can remove us in a short time to many countries . . .

2. EHAB

E-1. And he can learns the Islam instructions to his family and the ignorant people . . .

Discussion

In A-1, AYMAN uses to be preparing instead of to be prepared. The source of this error is a confusion of two related words: preparing (present participle) and prepared (past participle). The cause of this confusion may be a transfer from Arabic, which requires an active participle rather than a passive participle in this position, making the meaning something like to be ready.

In A-2, remove is confused with move. Apart from the classification of this error as a confusion of two related words with a somewhat similar meaning, another possible classification is unfamiliarity with word collocation. (See, for example, A-2 in subsection 6 below.)

In both examples A-1 and A-2, the words are related, i.e., derived from the same basic form. But in E-1, EHAB uses the word instructions where teachings would be appropriate.[20] These words are unrelated formally, but are

[20]Assuming that the student meant "teach the Islam[ic] instructions" instead of learn the Islam instructions (see

related semantically. This error may well have arisen from the student's confusion of taʕalīm "teachings" and taʕlimat "instructions" in Arabic, then translating taʕalīm as instructions.

6. Unfamiliarity with Word Collocation

The source of trouble in the examples in this subsection is that the students know the basic meaning of the lexical item but do not know its collocative patterns, i.e., which words it can occur with.

Examples

1. AYMAN

A-1. Therefore I cannot describe how much I was happy this moment not only because the result was wrong and I increased a hundred marks . . .

A-2. This way is the travel to the other foreign countries which is very easy to us to get it through the aircrafts or ships which can remove us in a short time to many countries . . .

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discussion of E-2 in subsection 8 below), it is worth noting that modification creates a problem since "teach the Islamic teachings" is hardly acceptable. A further modification is in order; "to familiarize his family with the teachings of Islam" or "to inform them of/about Islam" is suggested.

2. EHAB

E-1. A beautiful noise

E-2. one bird cannot make noise

3. HAMĀDA

H-1. Any one live in glass house should not shooting stones.

Discussion

When AYMAN wrote I increased a hundred marks, what he actually meant was that "his marks increased (by) a hundred," the error being in the unacceptable collocation I increased. Another possible classification of this error is that it is a translation from colloquial Egyptian, where zedt mīt daraga, literally "I increased a hundred marks," is acceptable.

Speaking of aircrafts and ships which can remove us to many countries, AYMAN, in A-2 above, missed the correct collocation, since remove is more likely to be used with things (i.e., inanimate objects) than with human beings.[21] Take, or carry would be more acceptable in this context.

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[21]According to Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary (2d ed.; Dorset and Baber, 1979), the word "remove" is defined as "to move (something) from where it is; to lift, push, or carry away, or from one place to another."

In H-1, shooting stones is obviously an error in collocation. The student probably did not know the word throw or hurl. Assuming that he knew the first word, we can say that the word might simply have not come to his mind at the time of writing (this was written in class while being observed), or more likely still, he thought it was too common to use. If it is the latter interpretation, then the error is an example of preference of low-frequency words (see section B below).

7. Overuse of a Few General Lexical Items

In the following examples AYMAN uses basic, general words as a result of his limited vocabulary. The result of such overdependence on a few general lexical items is a flat, uninteresting style and a failure to express the variety and subtlety of ideas he wanted to communicate. Overdependence on these general words affects negatively both meaning and style, since such basic words tend to dull the edge of meaning.

Shaughnessy points out the same problem when she states that

> The verbs of . . . basic vocabulary are the common verbs of the language--make, get, have, be, put, bring, give, cause, keep, etc.--and . . . they are used for all purposes.[22]

[22] Shaughnessy, Errors, p. 200.

Examples

A-1. And by getting of our hopes we shall be have justified something for our society.

A-2. And I am sure that the Muslim who does the orders given to him by Allah has a great happiness in his life.

A-3. And now, as we are looking forward to progress, we must do our best to do it.

Discussion

In A-1, AYMAN used getting of our hopes instead of achieving/realizing our hopes, thus creating a collocation problem, as well as sacrificing the effectiveness of his meaning.

The same problem occurs in A-2, where the student uses does the orders instead of carry out/execute the orders.

The same problem of dependence on general words also occurs in A-3, where AYMAN uses the verb do with progress rather than say make/achieve/realize progress. This example can well be described as an instance of the so-called common error of inability to distinguish the use of do from that of make--which is, in the final analysis, a collocation problem.

8. Nonce Errors

A number of the errors seemed to defy analysis. Some reasoning is offered whenever possible, however. The errors below could not fit into any of the above categories.

Examples

1. AYMAN

A-1a. Therefore we are sure that very much things still before us in order to justify the hope for the society.

A-1b. And by getting of our hopes we shall be have justified something for our society.

A-1c. But if they possessed it [i.e., money] they ought to put it in a benefit proposals in order to serve the world and justify the happiness to it.

A-2. Thus I find that our society in a great need of a cultural person . . .

2. EHAB

E-1. But he has a lot of stamps with little than two pounds.

E-2. And he can learns the Islam instructions to his family and the ignorant people . . .

3. WALEED.

W-1. He gave him stamps set up on the letter and sented.

W-2. the west convention

W-3. hearing television

Discussion

In A-1a, b, and c, I could not make any reasonable inference about the source of the error. The only possibility, remote as it may sound, is that AYMAN consulted a small or a "pocket" dictionary for a translation of the word yuḥaqqiq "realize; achieve," and came across the word justify. Consulting such a dictionary myself (The Up-To-Date Arabic-English Dictionary, Cairo, n.d.), I found that to justify was listed together with to firm and to prove as translations of ḥaqqaqa "to realize."

In A-2, AYMAN uses cultural person instead of cultured person. Since Arabic requires a passive participle in this position, the idea of using a passive participle should not be too remote for the student. However, the problem probably arose because cultural may be the only adjective the student knows and he may not be quite familiar with a passive participle used as an adjective.

In E-1, EHAB uses stamps with little than two pounds, where less than is expected both in Arabic and in English. The student may not be familiar with the comparative form of the adjective little.

In E-2, the student apparently means "teach the Islamic instructions" rather than learn them. The prepositional phrase in the direct object position helps establish the intended meaning. The reason that this error is classified as a nonce error is that Arabic, like English, makes a distinction between learn and teach (yataʕallam and yuʕallim, respectively). Part of the problem may lie in the partial phonetic similarity between the two words in Arabic. Still this is not quite an acceptable interpretation, since those two words are hardly confused, especially in view of the fact that another word is commonly used for teach (i.e., yudarris; also yaqūm bittadrīs "undertake teaching" is possible).

In example W-1, WALEED uses set up stamps where stick stamps is expected. Obviously a nonce error, it can however be classified under subsection 4 above (i.e., confusion of words formally or phonetically similar). But this is not a plausible classification, since the phonetic similarity is remote; it is limited to the initial consonant, and perhaps to the [t] sound which is part of

a cluster in the case of stick, but a single consonant in the case of set up.

In W-2, the student uses convention in the sense of détente.[23] However, it is also possible that the student meant traditions or customs; in such a case the error may be classified as a confusion of words with similar meaning (see 5 above).

The reason why WALEED wrote hearing television, rather than watching television or even seeing television (in which case it would possibly be a translation from colloquial Egyptian Arabic), remains mysterious. In Classical Arabic, yušāhid "watch" is expected in this context.

B. Preference of Low-frequency Words

As has already been pointed out in the beginning of this section (IV. Results), the present part of the results deals with the students' use in writing of certain lexical items in terms of their frequency to determine if the students' writing is characterized by greater interest in the form rather than the substance of words.

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[23] This sense was determined on the basis of the student's own translation into Arabic of his compositions at my request.

It is precisely such interest in the form rather than the substance of language that strikes the note for the present discussion. The students often showed in their compositions a greater interest in the form of what they were trying to say than in its substance. During interview I asked the four students if their compositions would have been different in any way if they had written them to be read by their peers rather than by me. One student (AYMAN) said that he would have used big words to impress his fellow-students even if he was not sure how they were spelled or how they were used.

Shaughnessy deals with the same problem of basic writers who often reveal a stylistic preference when they select formal (although less manageable) words over ordinary ones. This option (or, rather, dilemma) is present in English with its Latinate and Anglo-Saxon synonyms. Such preference for the formal is nurtured in a linguistic culture that distinguishes sharply between high or formal occasions and ordinary events.[24] This distinction is all the more pervasive in Egypt, with its diglossic situation.

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[24]Shaughnessy, Errors, p. 194.

Richards also gives some attention to this problem of "diglossiamania," as he calls it. He states that

> in English . . . we do not feel that there is a low status about words of high frequency, [sic] in the vocabulary we use in normal everyday situations. A Tamil-speaking student however may prefer the feel of I instructed him to obtain it for me over I told him to get it for me. There may be a distinct preference for archaic words or for words of low frequency, whereas the native speaker of English prefers a simple style. You may have noticed this in written English from Greek or Arabic [sic] students, for example, depending on the topic they choose to write about.[25]

The students' writing included some examples of such preference for low frequency words. It is probably appropriate to consider in brief the reason for this preference. In schools and higher educational institutions in Egypt only Classical Arabic (and none of the spoken dialects) is taught. With very few exceptions, Egyptian students attain some command of Classical Arabic before they start learning English as a foreign language. Since only Classical Arabic is taught formally in Egypt, and since this variety is almost the only one used in writing, Egyptian students come to assume that the same situation applies to the foreign language they are learning.

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[25] Jack Richards, "Error Analysis and Second Language Strategies," New Frontiers in Second Language Learning, eds. John Schumann and Nancy Stenson (Rowley, Mass.: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1974), p. 44.

Following are some examples chosen from the students' compositions. These lexical items exemplify the point already discussed above.

Examples

1. AYMAN

A-1. And others believed that it [i.e., happiness] is the beauty, and others that it is the grandeur . . . etc.

In this example, AYMAN prefers grandeur to greatness (of position) or to high position. Kučera and Francis assign a frequency of 6 and a rank of 11120-12398 to grandeur, while they assign a frequency of 11 and a rank of 7422-7919 to greatness. The fact that the word has a French origin (assuming that the student knew about it) may have contributed to the choice of grandeur over greatness.

2. EHAB

E-1. And when the others throw them by stones, the glass houses will fracture.

E-2. . . . now I have not any workmanship.

In example E-1 above, apart from erroneous collocation, there was nothing wrong with the student's choice of the word fracture, except that he probably preferred it to the word break, which has a higher frequency. According to Kučera and Francis, the word fracture occurs in their corpus only once, thus ranking somewhere between 27864 and 50406. As for the word break, it occurred 88 times, with a rank of 1202-1223.

E-2. Assuming that EHAB meant to say that he did not have any job, rather than "skill as a workman; artistry," then the word workmanship was misused. Presumably, the student thought that the word job was of low status since it is common. This is therefore an instance of greater interest in the form than in the message. The result of using workmanship was a distortion of the intended meaning. The word workmanship occurred in Kučera and Francis's corpus only 6 times, with a rank of 395.

3. HAMĀDA

H-1. But we must take the progressive ideas and let the bad habits which came from the foreign countries the novelties which our youth put it before their sights as a guide.

H-2. It is a bad thing to find our youth untaught like apes.

H-3. In this way you are destroy them undoing him instead of helping him to be a good citizen in society.

In example H-1, HAMĀDA uses the word sights in place of eyes. Assuming that he was translating from Arabic, the Arabic expression is ʔamāma ʕuyūnihim "before their eyes." Thinking that the word eyes is too common to be appropriate, he decided to use sights instead of eyes, with a resulting change in meaning.[26] The frequency of sights is 15 and its rank is 5973-6273, while the frequency of sight is 86, with a rank of 1239-1256. As for eyes, its frequency is 401 and its rank 216-218, while the frequency of eye is 122 and its rank 854-859.

H-2. The word apes does not occur in the corpus of Kučera and Francis. However, the word ape does. The word monkey which HAMĀDA might have used (in its plural form) has a frequency of 9 and a rank of 8479-9173. The word ape is less frequently used, with a frequency of 3 and a rank of 16684-20630.

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[26]This holds true although Webster's New Universal Unabridged Dictionary gives sights as the eyes as a British dialect usage. However, the dictionary does not list eyes as a synonym but rather includes it in one of the entries.

H-3. In example 3, HAMĀDA uses undoing (frequency 2 and rank 20631-27863) in preference to end (frequency 410 and rank 214) or to ruin (frequency 14 and rank 6274-6597).

4. WALEED

Some of the words WALEED used were: 1. blessedness; 2. naturalize; 3. exactness; 4. dissemble; and 5. target.

The first four words are of such low frequency that they do not occur at all in the Kučera and Francis corpus.[27] As for the word number 5, target, it has the frequency of 45 and a rank of 2430-2485.

For blessedness, WALEED could have used happiness (frequency 23, rank 4271-4426); for dissemble he could have used cover (frequency 88, rank 1202-1223) or hide (frequency 22, rank 4427-4584); and for target he could have used goal (frequency 60, rank 1829-1860).

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[27] However, some other form of each word occurred, i.e., blessed (frequency 13, rank 6598-6987); naturalized (frequency 3, rank 16684-20630); exact (frequency 27, rank 3794-3906); and dissembled (frequency 1, rank 27864-50406).

V. Suggestions for the Teaching of Vocabulary

A. Teaching Lexical Non-congruence

As we have already seen in section IV above, the greatest source of the students' vocabulary problems was that they often expected lexical isomorphism between Arabic and English. It is therefore important for vocabulary teaching to take account of inter-lingual lexical non-congruence. Otherwise, such teaching would fail to provide guidance to the students where they badly need it. It is the differences rather than the similarities that should be stressed if we want our teaching to be effective and helpful to our students. This concentration on non-congruence is important because anomalies are often the source of serious negative transfer from the students' native language (in this case Arabic) to the foreign language they are learning.

Two aspects of semantic theory offer a possibility for effective teaching of lexical items in terms of their similarities, and more importantly, in terms of their

differences. These aspects are: (1) semantic field theory and (2) componential analysis. The following brief discussion is intended to show how these aspects are of potential value in vocabulary teaching.[28]

1. Semantic Field Theory

Semantic field theory is based on the premise that the vocabulary of a language consists of many interrelated networks of relations between words, and not a long random list of words. These networks are called semantic fields. A very simple example of a semantic field is the set of kinship terms: father, mother, son, brother, sister, uncle, aunt, etc. All these words share some aspect of meaning which is not present in the word tree, for example.[29] By analyzing lexical items into semantic fields, we are no longer dealing with random lists of words, but rather with a systematic structure which a competent teacher can pass on to his students.

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[28] See Joanna Channell, "Applying Semantic Theory to Vocabulary Teaching," English Language Teaching Journal, 35 (1981), 115-22.

[29] For a detailed discussion of "semantic field theory," see Adrienne Lehrer, Semantic Fields and Lexical Structures (Amsterdam: North-Holland; New York: American Elsevier, 1974).

2. Componential Analysis

Words are said to belong to the same semantic field when they share some aspects of meaning.[30] For example, walk and run are similar in being verbs describing ways in which animate beings move, yet they differ in that run implies a faster movement of the legs than walk. Componential analysis offers a systematic way of describing such similarities and differences among lexical items. It consists of breaking down the meaning of a word or words into different features known as semantic components.[31] Analysis of walk may be rendered as follows:

[+ move] [+ by feet] [+ on land] [+ placing down one foot after another]

whereas that for run may be:

[+ move] [+ quickly] [+ by feet] [+ on land] [+ placing down one foot after another]

More specifically, semantic field theory and componential analysis may be used to describe meanings of

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[30] It is to be noted, however, that words hardly share all meaning aspects. Hence, the term 'synonym', which is widely used in foreign language teaching, is often confusing rather than helpful to students. For a further discussion of this point, see S. Ullman, Semantics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967).

[31] For a detailed description of semantic features of lexical items, see Eugene A. Nida, Componential Analysis (The Hague: Mouton, 1975). See also E. H. Bendix, Componential Analysis of General Vocabulary (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1966).

lexical items that are new to students, and to teach word collocations to them. Following is a brief discussion of each.

B. Describing Meaning

Channell points out that for a word to enter students' active vocabulary, the students need to be able to answer two questions about this word: (1) how does the word relate to other words with similar meaning? and (2) which other words can it be used with, and in which contexts? She further points out that this is where diagrammatic representation using semantic field theory and componential analysis can help students.[32]

For example, an analysis of the similarities and differences among the related words surprise; astonish; amaze; astound; and flabbergast can be made visually explicit by rendering it in the form of a grid like the one shown in Figure 4. In the grid, a + sign indicates that the marked component is part of the meaning of the word, whereas the absence of a + sign means either that the component is not part of the meaning of the word in question, or that it is not distinctive in differentiating the word from others in the same semantic field.[33]

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[32] Channell, "Semantic Theory," 118-19.

[33] Ibid.

Figure 4

Channell's Grid of Related Lexical Items

	affect with wonder	because unexpected	because difficult to believe	so as to cause confusion	so as to leave one helpless to act or think
surprise	+	+			
astonish	+		+		
amaze	+			+	
astound	+				+
flabbergast	+				+

C. Teaching Collocations

As has already been mentioned, an important aspect of knowing a word is knowing which words it may collocate with. According to Channell, presentation of new words to students must always be accompanied by a good number of typical collocations in the form of example sentences or of collocation grids like the one shown in Figure 5. Such collocational grids derive their importance from the fact that students often fail to realize the potential even of words they know well, because they use them only in a limited number of collocations of which they are sure. It is therefore essential to present a good number of typical collocations when a word is first presented to the students. This is particularly true, Channell points out, for students who have little access to native speakers with whom they can try out the collocational possibilities of the new words they learn.[34] This is, by and large, the situation Egyptian students of English find themselves in.

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[34] Channel, "Semantic Theory," 120.

Figure 5

Channell's Collocation Grid

	woman	man	child	dog	bird	flower	weather	landscape	view	house	furniture	bed	picture	dress	present	voice
handsome		+									+				+	
pretty	+		+	+	+	+		+	+	+		+	+	+		(+)
charming	+	(+)	+					(+)	(+)	+			(+)	+		+
lovely	+		+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+	+

The reader's attention is called to some collocational possibilities not included in the original grid. These possibilities are marked by the plus sign enclosed in parentheses.